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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 8772

RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2510

RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 0009

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0991

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1622

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000028

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR KDEM BG

SUBJECT: FRESH FACES, SOME SURPRISES IN BANGLADESH'S NEW GOVERNMENT AS PRIME MINISTER CONSOLIDATES POWER

Classified By: Ambassador J.F. Moriarty reasons 1.4(b)&(d)

Summary

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¶1. (C) Following much secrecy and speculation, Bangladesh's newly elected Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, unveiled her government at a swearing in ceremony on January 6. Hasina excluded all but one member of the ruling Awami League's (AL) Presidium from the Cabinet. Twenty-eight of the 32 individuals chosen will be serving as Ministers for the first time and the Cabinet includes a record number of women (five). Hasina loyalists point to the appointments as a sign of her commitment to cleaner government. The appointments also reflect Hasina's desire to consolidate her control over the party after facing challenges to her leadership following the January 11, 2007 State of Emergency.

Neither Forgive, Nor Forget

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¶2. (C) Including the Prime Minister, the government will have 24 Cabinet-level Ministers and 8 more junior Ministers of State. In addition, Hasina has appointed five senior leaders as Cabinet-rank advisors and may also appoint additional Ministers at a later date. The Prime Minister will retain several important portfolios including energy and power, religious affairs and defence though she is likely to cede day to day control of these to her advisors. Hasina also announced that Parliament will elect AL Deputy Leader, Zillur Rahman, as the country's next President once it re-convenes. At the January 6 ceremony, Zillur Rahman received a place of honor sitting between Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana.

¶3. (C) Only four of the 32 Ministers served in the 1996 - 2001 AL government and only Motia Chowdhury is a Presidium member. Though most are veteran AL activists, several are first time members of parliament (MP), including the Home Minister and the Foreign Affairs Minister. The government includes a record five women, four of whom are at cabinet rank, and three members of ethnic and religious minorities, of whom two are in cabinet-level positions. Two of the 32 Ministers are from other parties in the 14 party alliance and three are un-elected "technocrats" appointed by the Prime Minister. (Note: According to the Constitution, technocrats can hold up to 10 percent of Cabinet seats. End Note.)

Change or more of the same?

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¶4. (C) The new Foreign Affairs Minister, Dipu Moni, and the Home Minister, Sahara Khatun, are emblematic of the changes taking place under the AL government. Both are party

activists, women and first time MPs. Most importantly, they are known to be fiercely loyal to Hasina. Moni is a physician, has been actively engaged on women's issues, and has studied in the US and UK. By choosing well-educated newcomers, Hasina signals her desire to raise the standard for Cabinet members. She also appears to be grooming new party leadership and challenging the traditional culture of politics in Bangladesh.

¶5. (C) Critics contend however, that though these Ministers are new faces on the political scene, the substance behind the selections remains the same. A U.S.-based Bangladeshi Political Scientist noted, "this looks like reform but in terms of content, will involve the same patron-client relationships as in the past." Critics point out that the selection of Ministers was done only with input from Hasina's sister and one other close political advisor. Moreover, none of those who have challenged Hasina were chosen, suggesting that she is trying to "skip" a generation of political leadership and create a new center of power in the party with activists whose only loyalty is to her. Some allege, admittedly without any shred of proof, that the military may have been involved in vetting candidates, thereby effectively limiting Hasina's choices.

Comment

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¶6. (C) On balance, Hasina's picks for the new government represent a welcome change from politics as usual in Bangladesh. The new Ministers will need to learn their jobs quickly in order to help Bangladesh confront the significant domestic and foreign policy challenges facing the new government.

MORIARTY